Reflections on a Theology of Humanitarian Action

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Introduction

I would begin our joint reflection today by briefly delineating two broad presuppositions that are embedded in the topic itself, and which are required in order to provide a foundation for the logic and validity of our discussion on the subject.

Namely, the title of this reflection may imply some sort of differentiation between a theology of relief and a theology of transformational development, as though they were separated or stemmed from diverse sources. Such dichotomy, whether implied or explicit, is in fact nonexistent and biblically and theologically unsustainable. For to speak of a theology of development is actually to speak also of a theology of relief, and viceversa. Which is why, perhaps, we should speak more of a theology of humanitarian action, as an expression consciously inclusive of both relief and development.

Which brings me to the second presupposition that, really, validates the first. That is, while they should not be fully equated, there is a direct correspondence and continuity between theology of relief (and therefore a theology of development as well), and the theology of the Christian Church in its nature and mission. In other words, one cannot properly talk about a theology of relief outside of the contours of the theology of the Church and its mission in the world. Because, of necessity the theology of the Church and its mission serve as an antecedent to that of relief. Indeed, it would be more precise to say that one cannot properly discuss a theology of relief outside of the theology of God Himself and His sovereign reign and activity in human history, as reported in Scriptures, and supremely revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. God and his acts in history, in other words, are the foundational sources for a discourse towards a theology of relief. There is no other truly valid framework within which to speak intelligibly on the subject.

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¹ This notwithstanding, it is probably true that certain Biblical themes and/or theological motifs yield themselves more readily to creative usage in relation to relief, as others do in relation to development. In this paper, however, I will continue to use the phrase "theology of relief."

Most of past work on the subject of a theology of development or relief has by and large been heavily influenced by the ideas put forward by liberation theology of South America. And the typical methodology has been such as to draw on the Exodus story for notions on liberation and empowerment; reflect on the Psalms that talk about God's love and care for the oppressed and the suffering; and then move onto the Gospels where Jesus is obviously concerned about the poor, where he shows his love for them, and teaches his disciples to do the same. Our own, Bryant Myers, however, in his well-known book Walking with the Poor, chooses a narrative approach to a theology of humanitarian action. Quite contrary to the post-modern sensitivities, which are characterized by an "incredulity towards meta narratives," Myers creatively opts for building a theology of transformational humanitarian action by exploring the convergence of the personal and corporate stories of the Christian humanitarian, her agency, and the beneficiary and his community, which in turn all converge with the grand (meta) narrative of the Biblical story that begins with creation and ends with redemption.

I wish there were no constraints in this exercise so that I could tackle both exegetically as well as theologically if not all then at least the majority of the Biblical passages, stories, themes and motifs that have an import for a theology of relief. However, since that is not the case, I will restrain myself and assume a thematic approach by focusing on a few themes, which in my bias I find particularly compelling. It follows, therefore, that this essay is by no means exhaustive on the subject. I will here employ theological reflection and homiletical theologizing.

Biblical and Theological Potential for a Theology of Relief

To place the discussion that follows in a broader context, and to help our mind's eye to see the breadth of Biblical and theological possibility and promise for a theology of relief, it would be useful at this point to reference ever so briefly a few of the Biblical themes, stories, and theological patterns that carry significance and a bearing on a theology of relief. Most of these have been more extensively covered elsewhere by others, which is why I will cover them sketchily.

□ Creation and the Social Imperative - In the very first pages of Scriptures we find the story of the creation of mankind and the whole lot of its physical environ. Humanity and the world were God's act, and the result was "very good" (Gen. I). God created man, differentiated as male and female, in His own image and likeness, and instructed them to "be fruitful and increase in number, to fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. I:27). The task of human life is twofold in that it consists of being and doing. Man has a social mandate based on divine imperative. He was placed in a relationship to be responsible both in his being and doing towards the Creator, humankind as a whole, the creatures of the

² Myers, L. Bryant. Walking With The Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development, New York: Orbis Books, 1999, p. 11.

³ Layotard, François. The Postmodern Condition, Indianapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. xxiv.

earth, and the earth itself. The good creation has been disturbed by sin and its profound consequences. Responsible being and doing on man's part, therefore, calls for action to undo as much as possible those consequences of sin, and alleviate the pain and suffering, to the degree possible, caused by sin.

- □ Pilgrim and Refugee Motifs in both the OT and NT According to Frederick Norwood, "At every stage in Christian history, even from the beginning, the refugee motif has been central." Both the "story of Israel and the story of the church is also a story of refugees." The Israelites were refugees themselves for much of their OT (Old Testament) existence, starting with Abraham who departed from home into an unknown land, their 400-year ordeal in Egypt, and all the way to their captivity in Babylon. Furthermore, caring for the alien or foreigner among them was Israel's social, ethical, and religious responsibility (Ex. 22:21; Dt. 10: 17-18; 119-120). Israel was to provide justice for the alien and show genuine love and concern for them as they would for themselves, because they themselves were aliens in Egypt (Lv. 19:33-34). In the NT (New Testament), the Church too is in a refugee and alien mode, both historically and politically, as well as theologically vis-à-vis "the world." The refugee theme which is most prevalent in the OT, and the pilgrim motif of the NT (see Heb. 11) provide, therefore, the basis and theological rationale for love and action on behalf of "the other," the overall wellbeing of the neighbor, and the alleviation of their suffering. Christian theology tells us that in the final judgment the issue will be where you stand with Jesus Christ. And the evidence will be how you have treated your neighbor.
- □ Hospitality and Human Commonality There are numerous stories in the Bible that speak of human generosity and hospitality, especially to strangers, aliens, or the needy. Recent missiological studies have shown the social and psychological value and significance of hospitality. Kosuke Koyama's research has confirmed the fact that people need good neighbors, and that hospitality as a selfless invitation and welcoming is central to being a neighbor. Our human commonality, solidarity, and Christian love, demand that we give hospitable reception to the other. In the context of relief, hospitality becomes a reality (even though the humanitarian space will probably be away from the humanitarian's home) if and when we deliver aid to our beneficiaries with the genuine recognition and acceptance of our human commonality (Ephesians 4:25-30 – "we are members of one another") and our mutual "neighborhood" as children of God by creation, if not already children of God by redemption. Hospitality will become reality if and when in our response we "get close and personal,"⁷ and invite the recipients to do the same. Hospitality will become reality especially if and when our aid is delivered and shared with our

⁴ Norwood, Frederick. Strangers and Exiles: A History of Religious Refugees. Abingdon, 1969, p. 52.

⁵ Myers, Bryant. "Humanitarian Response: Christians in Response to Uprooted People,"...p. 46.

⁶ Koyama, Kosuke. "Extending Hospitality to Strangers: A Missiology of Theologia Crucis," *International Review of Mission*, 82. No. 321 (October 1993).

⁷ Myers, "Humanitarian Response," p. 49.

beneficiaries with our hearts attached to it, as Lewes Smedes loved to say. James Russell Lowell has said the same thing, "Not what we give, but what we share-For the gift without the giver is bare; Who gives himself with his alms feeds three: Himself, his hungry neighbor, and Me."

A Theological Framework

I will below frame my reflections into four sections. The first will deal with the basic and fundamental rationale for engaging in emergency relief as derived from the doctrine of human nature. The second section will address the issue of our motivation for engagement in relief and humanitarian action in general. The third part will elaborate on the ultimate criterion for humanitarian action as expressed in the greatest commandment, which is love. And finally, I will propose an understanding of relief being a deed that testifies to God's immanence.

The Rationale - Theological Anthropology

"The author of the first account of creation in Genesis, Chapter One, makes it quite clear that the line between the human and the non-human is 'from above,' and not from 'below.' That which marks the human off from all else in creation is the fact that the human is addressed, not merely called into being, by the divine Word. 'And God said to them...' is the event which constitutes these creatures to be human and, therefore, to bear his own image and likeness (Gen. 1:18)."

The Genesis account of creation speaks of a God who creates everything by the power of his Word, except for the human being. The account culminates with an incredible change on the part of God in the method of his creating. We are told that having created the conditions for life on earth and the entire creaturely world, God decided to become personally and tangibly involved in the creation of man. With his own hands God molds and shapes lovingly the first human being, breathes the breath of live into man, and creates him in His very own image (*imago Dei*). And these facts, on the one hand the manner in which man and woman were created by the touch of the Almighty, while on the other the fact that they were created in the image and likeness of God, are crucial when it comes to the value and significance of the human being. They bestow on humanity tremendous dignity and worth. In his very being in the *imago Dei*, man has something in common with God.

Furthermore, the fact of human creation in the *imago Dei* is hugely important in that through it the relationship and the destiny between God and man were joined forever. This marvelous bond between the divine and the human, of course, was decidedly completed by the Incarnation of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. God has much vested in mankind; a large part of Himself.

⁸ Anderson, S. Ray. The Shape of Practical Theology, Pasadena: Fuller Seminary Press, 1999, p. 127.

And while it is true that the Fall and sin introduced a genuine separation between God and man, and that something utterly negative and radical happened to the very nature of man as a result of sin and its consequences, man/humankind continues to be inherently precious, and unreservedly valued and loved by God, its Creator. God loves this world even in its fallen-ness. His love reaches into the world even in its sin and moral decadence. It especially reaches into the world when the world is visited by the forces of evil, by pain, hunger, bloodshed, profound suffering, death! The unfathomable sacrifice of our Lord in His incarnation, and especially on the cross as the ultimate salvific intervention of love of humanity, validates this belief totally.

It is no surprise, therefore, that from the first to the last page of the Bible, it is clear that God's will aims at man's well-being at all levels, aims at his definitive, and comprehensive good. But, not only in the sense of ultimate salvation of eternal life, but also man's well being in the "here and now." And in a sense the universal and final criterion is man's well-being, and his ultimate salvation. Consider for example Jesus' immense and, for the lews, very scandalous relativization of sacred traditions and institutions:

- 1. "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath..." Jesus in a sense relativizes the law. Even the law is not the beginning and the end of all God's ways. Though it is not denied in any way by Jesus that the law is God's good gift and that the law is continuously applicable, what holds is the proposition that the commandments are for man's sake and not man for the sake of commandments.
- 2. "Be reconciled first with your brother and then come and offer your gift in the temple..." (or in the language of the OT prophets, 'stop oppressing the poor and start helping them...before that happens your 'worship to God' is nothing and is meaningless'). Jesus relativizes the temple, religious cult, liturgy and worship of God. Even the temple is not the beginning and the end of all God's ways. Though it is not denied that the temple is God's gift. What holds is the proposition that reconciliation and everyday service to our fellow man have sequentially priority over service to God. (This is not to idolize man, though).

Consequently, we cannot take God and his will seriously without at the same time taking seriously man and his well- being. Man's humanity is demanded by the humanity of God himself. True service of God is already service of man and true service of man is also already service of God (though service of God cannot be reduced to service of man). For Jesus himself said "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (see Matt. 25:31-46). And so, engagement in emergency relief and humanitarian action in general is unequivocally demanded by the rationale of human origins and nature, his value, and his overall well being.

Finally, the fact that we humanitarians, relief professionals, share in the human commonality that arises from creation in the *imago Dei* common to all humankind, is

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⁹ Not "total depravity," though, as Augustine and Reformed theology have suggested.

¹⁰ Küng, Hans. On Being a Christian, New York: Pocket Books, 1978, p. 251.

an important one for us especially because, on the one hand, it ensures the possibility for our own genuine vicarious identification with the plight of pain and suffering of our fellow-human beings who are in need of humanitarian assistance, while on the other, it weakens the prospect for our response to be nothing more than detached paternalistic benevolence, of which humanitarianism has often been accused.

The Motivation: Christian Ontology

One of the most important aspects of a theology of relief is the whole question of motivation. What motivates us to respond to emergencies? Wherein are the rationale and the inspiration for disaster relief sourced? What drives the whole Christian relief enterprise?

It goes without saying that sometimes the main motivating factors behind relief responses have less to do with our Christian philosophy or our value system than with pragmatics, marketing advantage, organizational image, or global prestige.

And so we must ask, what ought to be the main motivation? Is there perhaps some sort of a theology, so to speak, that ought to be the inspiration and the motivation for emergency relief? I propose that there is, and it is our Christian ontology. Now, ontology is a branch of metaphysics, which includes philosophy and theology, which deals with the nature of being and existence. It deals with questions of identity and relationality: Who are we? What are we like? Who are we in relations to? Etc.

In modern Christian theology ontology has mostly been associated with the liberal philosopher and theologian, Paul Tillich, whom many have accused of not even being Christian. But, there is a much more legitimate usage of ontology as a theological construct. Because, the Bible talks about the ontology of a Christian, without using the word itself. It talks of ontology whenever it talks about man as being in the image of Christ, or imago Christi. We are under constraints here and cannot go into an exegetical and theological discussion of the imago Christi in the NT. Basics must suffice. We have to, however, note that the *imago Christi* is a NT development of and progression on the OT concept of *imago Dei* (image of God). The two comprise the same doctrine of what we call theological anthropology (or doctrine of the nature of man), but with a very significant differentiation. Namely, in the OT, imago Dei is mainly in reference to man having been created in the image of God with all that that entails, physically, socially, intellectually, spiritually, etc. On the other hand, the emphasis in the NT concept of *imago Christi* is "unquestionably on the spiritual side of man." Simply said, imago Dei refers to the "natural man and his potential," while imago Christi to the "spiritual man and his consummation." 13

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¹¹ See his *The Courage to Be*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959.

¹² Lemmon, G. Eric. *The Imago Dei and the Revolution of Christian Ethics*, Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1970, p. 108.

¹³ Ibid, p. 134.

You will remember the beautiful passage written by the apostle Paul in 2 Cor. 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" It is a passage which, really, speaks of the recreation of man, or the restoration and fulfillment of God's original purposes in creation, human nature in particular.

In Romans 8:29 we find a text that actually uses the expression *imago Christi*. Paul says, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed to the likeness of his Son*, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."

It is a recurring theme in the NT that the believer is conformed to the image of Christ. As a present reality this implies a continual conformity to the character of Jesus Christ in each believer. In Romans 8:29, we have a promise that the image of the Son is to be passed on to the sons (and daughters). It happens in the power of the Holy Spirit (Col. 3: 9-11), through the process of *metanoia*, "conversion," which was "formerly misleadingly translated – 'repentance.' It is not a question of 'doing penance' externally, in sackcloth and ashes. ...It is a decisive change of will, and awareness changed from the roots upwards, a new basic attitude, a different scale of values." An inward recreation into a new personhood, which has outward implications, in other words (Eph. 4;23-24).

It is in the *imago Christi*, therefore, that we find our ontology, our being. And it is this new ontology that should be the ultimate motivation for our engagement in emergency relief. Our ultimate motivation behind delivering aid and relieving the pain and the suffering of the needy of this world should not be guilt. It should not be some sort of institutional agenda. It should not be some kind of humanistic benevolence. It should not even be a feeling of obligation towards divine commandment. Rather, it should be an ontological motivation, propelled by our *being* in the image of Christ; our new *being* which cannot but <u>be</u> and <u>act</u> just like Jesus Christ.

If this ontology is not the source of our relief response, and our whole humanitarian project for that matter, then Donald Bloesch's charge would sadly be all too correct, and easily attributed to our own humanitarian action. "Humanitarianism," said Bloesch,"...is not the same as the righteousness that comes from faith working through love (Gal. 5:4-6)." In other words, if our humanitarian engagements are not motivated by the "who and what" we have become in Jesus Christ, then our humanitarian work would be something other than Christian faith working through love. Our new ontology (new creation in Christ) ought to precede our humanitarian action if the latter is to be genuine and not just an expression of some humanistic moral obligation.

Moreover, such an ontologically informed and motivated humanitarianism would preclude the practice of instrumentalization of humanitarian action, wherein to act, to bring aid, or to love, is by and large in order to gain one's own sort of inner fulfillment, self-aggrandizement, reputation and image, or perhaps legalistically even happiness and "salvation," or, to demonstrate their own virtue in their own and other people's eyes,

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¹⁴ Küng, p. 250.

¹⁵ Bloesch, Donald. Faith and Its Counterfeits, InterVarsity Press, 1981, p. 48.

or the virtue resident in humanity, of which they are a part. Indeed, in ontologically motivated humanitarianism such possibility is excluded, because there is sort of a holy oblivion on the part of the humanitarian as to their doing. They are like the righteous ones at the judgment who ask: "When did we feed you, Lord, when we saw you hungry, or give you water to drink when we saw you thirsty....?" (See Matt. 25). They cannot but do good. That is their nature!

In the final analysis, it seems to me, it is our ontology understood vis-à-vis the *imago Christi* that carries the promise and potential for effective Christian witness and impact in relief situations more than any other alternative approach. Just imagine what the effects and consequence in terms of Christian witness would be like if we all got involved out of who and what we have become in Jesus Christ!

The Criterion - Love

The test of our being Christian and of our faith is our ability to love (James 1:16-17). And as we stated in the section above, Christian love goes beyond moral obligation or rational expectation. It flows out of piety, out of a new nature, out of our ontology in Jesus Christ. However, the nature of Christian love is such that it is not essentially sentimental nor romantic, because, its starting point is the concrete engagement with the realities of human suffering. Which suggests that Christian love is tangible, and it is relational. It is relational because it flows out of someone who has been created in the image of the triune God and recreated in the image of Christ, and in that sense this love is only complete when it is given and invested into the other. ¹⁶

The Scriptures in general, and Jesus' teaching in particular, talk about love of both God and man. ¹⁷ In fact, Jesus summed up all of the commandments to a dual commandment of love, which in fact is a single commandment. ¹⁸ By doing so, says Hans Küng, "Jesus achieves simply and concretely an unparalleled *reduction* and *concentration* of all the commandments into this dual commandment and combines love of God and love of man in an indissoluble unity. Since then it has been impossible to play off God and man against each other." ¹⁹

Even by just looking at the surface of things in Jesus' life and teaching, it becomes obvious that for Jesus love is the final criterion of a man's belief and conduct. But, what is this love as the ultimate motivation and standard like? What are its qualities? What is it characterized by?

Really, the shortest and yet most comprehensive answer would be to say that this love that qualifies to be the final criterion in God's whole economy is the Agape love, which

¹⁸ In fact, this summing up preceded Jesus and is found in the OT, in the so-called Shema of Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18.

¹⁶ Myers, Walking with the Poor, p. 43.

¹⁷ Küng, p. 257.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 257.

originates in God and is unconditionally self-giving. Donald Bloesch reflects on the character of this love by saying,

"The humanist knows little or nothing of the love that reaches out to the poor...without any ulterior motive. For the ancient Greeks, love understood as Eros proceeds upward to divinity, not downward to humanity in its frailty and brokenness, as does Agape or Christian love. Eros seeks its own good or perfection, while Agape seeks the good of the undeserving neighbor. Eros is self-enriching and self-elevating whereas Agape is self-emptying. Eros means realizing one's own fulfillment in God and with the aid of others; Agape means making oneself expendable for God and for others." ²⁰

There is absolutely no other event in the history of the universe that better describes the character of this love than the Cross of Jesus. For the way of the Cross is the way of Agape. And the way of Agape involves the denial of the self for the good of the neighbor. It excludes self-aggrandizement or self-glorification. It rather involves sacrificial service. The way of the Cross is characterized not by the securing of the self from harm but by the setting aside of personal cares and concerns in order to serve a neighbor; by forgetting of the self in love. Christian love that has matured into Agape love does not require external motivators, including religious ones. It is itself its own motivator, especially because it will come out of a person whose nature has been molded into the image of Christ. It is a "fire" burning in the bones of a Christian driving one to sacrifice one's own interests and welfare for the good of others. This love is "not prudent and calculating but ecstatic and overflowing, or as Bernard of Clairvaux put it, "impetuous, vehement, burning." ²¹

Would it be appropriate for us as relief humanitarians to allow our imaginations to be triggered so as to see that the impulsiveness, explosiveness, and rashness of relief is as much a consequence of the nature of humanitarian emergencies as it is of the impetuousness, ecstasy, vehemence and burning of our Christian love...as a love that has no time to calculate the prudence of a relief response? I think so.

It is thrilling and beautiful for me to attempt parallels between our humanitarian relief action and (I) Christ as the "sent" One; and (2) Christ as the One who dies on a cross as a sacrificial act.

(I) It is great to be called, but I believe it is equally great, if not greater, to be sent. Because being sent implies mission and vocation. I realize that it is a theological construct, but the image of humanitarians being deployed into the field, where there is pain to be alleviated, suffering to be soothed, hungry tummies to be fed, tears to be wiped, hope to be inspired, even lives to be saved, is so poignantly evocative of God the Father's sending of Jesus Christ into this world of pain, suffering, hunger, tears, hopelessness, and death. There is something "messianic" about a relief deployment.

²⁰ Bloesch, p. 49.

²¹ Ibid, p. 50.

(2) It is again a theological construct, but a deployment into the no-man's land of Darfur, under the relentless heat of the African sun, or into the utter devastation of Banda Aceh, typically amounts to an act of self-sacrifice. A deployment can be a way of the cross, and thus a way of Agape, where the Christian humanitarian becomes the "broken body and spilled out blood" for the needy in a relief situation. Indeed, there is something "messianic" about a relief deployment.

In the Gospels we find a beautiful story that Jesus told, which is perhaps the best know Bible story around. It is that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), at the heart of which is the summation of the law in love for God and neighbor; the bringing together of the Shema (which every good Jew repeated daily) and Lev. 19:18.

It is a story that affirms the fact that when it comes to true love, "actions speak louder than words. It is not talk, but action, which makes clear the nature of love. Practice is the criterion." It is a story that affirms the fact that when we are asked to love our neighbors, we are required to love them not vaguely or just emotionally, but in very definite, practical, and realistic ways. After all it is so that we love ourselves, isn't it?

Reading in between lines, the Interpreter's Bible Commentary observes, "there is a sense in which we do inevitably love our neighbors as ourselves, because it is how we regard ourselves that determines how we regard others. It is interesting that the "lawyer" raises the question: "And who is my neighbor?" For it is how I regard myself which determines whom I am going to regard as my neighbor. If what I most esteem in myself is something I share with only a small group of people, my human interest will largely be limited to that group. If on the other hand, the thing in myself which I value the most is something that every other human being at least potentially possesses, there will be no limit to my social concern. The priest and the Levite understood and esteemed themselves as a priest and a Levite, and the man lying on the ground was neither. The Samaritan, however, thought of himself not primarily as a Samaritan of a certain class, not even as a Samaritan first and foremost, but as a human being, and therefore to him the important thing was not that a Jew was in need of help, but that a man was."²³

Our Christian identity does not allow false self-understandings and self-love for the wrong reasons. It does not allow any pride or elitism for racial, professional or any other reasons. It tells us that "God is no respecter of persons," (Acts 10: 34) and that His love for me is not one bit greater or lesser than his love for any other human being on the planet.

As we reflect towards a theology of relief, it is significant also to note how the story of the Good Samaritan is told in such a way that it answers both the lawyer's question "Who is my neighbor?" as well as an unasked, yet more significant, question such as "Who is the true bestower of neighborly love?" It seems to me, the later is the more

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²² Küng, p. 257.

²³ Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Abingdon Press, 1971, p. 194.

appropriate question to ask, because it suggests an interest in taking proactively the initiative to demonstrate love, to help, to ensure the well-being of the other. It implies understanding oneself first as the neighbor who is ready to offer help before the neighbor who is in need of help is identified. "The neighbor was the Samaritan who approached the wounded man and made him his neighbor. The neighbor, as has been said, is not the one whom I find in my path, but rather the one in whose path I place myself, the one whom I approach and actively seek."²⁴

And finally, this parable is marvelously illustrative of the quality of genuine Christian love, which is not calculating and restrained, as though one were merely doing one's duty; but will be, so to speak, naively extravagant. ²⁵ Just look at what all the Samaritan does. His love operates on the principle of abundance and not on the principle of scarcity. And the greatest thing is that the Samaritan is not trying to do his duty. The point is that he is not aware of duty at all, anymore than we are aware of duty when treating ourselves generously. He loves his neighbor as himself.

It seems to me that the parable of the Good Samaritan validates as appropriate and only natural World Vision's slogan: "World Vision responds, always!" Because the alternative would mean leaving some wounded man to bleed to death on the road to Jericho.

This parable also seriously confronts notions that foresee and even promote a scenario wherein a Christian humanitarian agency such as World Vision could drop emergency relief²⁶ from its overall mission and rather invest in and focus on development and advocacy only. In the context of the parable of the good Samaritan, however, that would mean leaving the wounded Jew semi-dead on the road to Jericho in order to deal with the underlining social, economic, structural, political, etc., issues and factors that might have contributed to the incident. But, clearly, the story and therefore the Story Teller as well, do not allow such an option to those who are serious about being true bestowers of neighborly love. And it is this kind of love that is the ultimate criterion for a theology of relief, because one cannot possibly go beyond it.

"The Deed" - Testimony to Divine Immanence

I would like to propose that our hermeneutic of relief ought to be imaginative enough to see relief as a deed²⁷ that testifies to God's immanence (presence), in the world in general, and in the midst of a relief situation in particular.

My encounter with the philosophy and theology of the Jewish ethicist and mystic, Abraham Heschel, has made a powerful impression on my theology and personal spirituality. Among the many of his ideas that I have much appreciated is the belief in the revelatory potential of a good deed. "Where is the presence, where is the glory of God

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²⁴ Gutierrez, Gustavo. A Theology of Liberation, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, p. 113.

²⁵ Can we then ever accuse relief of being too extravagant and constly?

²⁶ "Isn't it too costly and extravagant, after all?"- the cynical critic might say.

²⁷ Of course, comprised of a plurality of deeds.

to be found?" asks Heschel, and concludes that it is found in creation (Psalm 19),²⁸ in Scriptures,²⁹ "and in a sacred deed."³⁰

While there is no doubt that primacy belongs to Scripture, which reports on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ who is the ultimate revelation of God, as the place where God is more immediately found, it is a winsome idea, biblically sound, and more meaningful for us to believe in the immanence of God in deeds than in the immanence of God in nature, or creation as a whole. For in a very real sense, God can be more immediately found in "acts of kindness ... than in mountains and forests." ³¹

A genuinely good deed lived out by a follower of Christ and in the name of Christ does become a sacred deed that reveals the presence of Christ. A kind deed is a way of God, "a way where the self-evidence of the Holy is disclosed." Mother Teresa believed that when we have performed a self-giving deed for the poor, the needy, the afflicted and the lonely, they would see the love of Jesus. 33

When Debs Harris, who is on the Global Rapid Response Team, stoops over to console a 28-year old woman - whose life hangs in the balance, not only because of the ruthlessness of the Janjaweed militiamen that has left its mark literally on her body and her soul, but also because of malnutrition, lack of clean water, shelter, and even disease - though she may have at the moment few words of religious significance to utter, through her touch of deep love and real compassion she will have done a sacred deed that expresses God Himself.

Our deeds of love become sacred deeds. And sacred deeds are a testimony and evidence of God's immanence; of His presence in the concreteness of the moment. In other words, our acts of kindness and love demonstrated in a humanitarian space which is so often oppressed by hopelessness, despair, suffering, futility, and even death, become a revelation of God. Because, the sacred deeds are in a sense the Divine in disguise. And if so, a deed becomes an encounter with God not only for the recipient of the deed, but also for the one who performs it.

In our earlier discussion we said that because of man's creation in the image and likeness of God, in his very being man has something in common with God. But, we could similarly conclude that the Bible teaches that man can also act in the likeness of God. Which is a beautiful thought, indeed! The usual Biblical expression for acting in the likeness of God is "to walk in His ways." As He feeds the hungry, so do we feed the hungry; as He protects the weak and the poor, so do we protect the weak and the

²⁸ Karl Barth would have opposed this view since he adamantly rejected natural theology as a source of theological and salvific knowledge of God. I disagree with Barth in his denial of natural theology.

²⁹ Though for Heschel "Scriptures" refers to the Old Testament books alone.

³⁰ Rothschild, A. Fritz. Ed. Between God and Man. An Interpretation of Judaism from the Writings of Abraham Heschel. New York: The Free Press, 1959, p.79.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, p. 80.

³³ Bloesch, p. 55.

poor; as He clothes the naked so do we cloth the naked; as He sends his only Son into this world of pain and death, so are we deployed into the nations of the world to sooth the pain and to save lives.